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**CELEBRATE DIVERSITY, EVEN IF THAT INCLUDES THE HOPELESSLY
 SUPERFICIAL: LESSONS ON GENDER, RACE, CLASS, AND SEXUALITY IN
 LEGALLY BLONDE**

Abstract

This study critically interprets Luketic's (2001) film Legally Blonde to uncover the explicit as well as implicit curricula that the film advances. While some claim that the film presents a positive depiction of a strong female protagonist who overcomes educational barriers, this message is undercut by problematic constructions of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Critical readings of the film are linked to critical, commercial, and viewer responses to the film. The study concludes by considering the contradictory nature of this film that attempts to put forward a pro-diversity message without dealing with the issues facing individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

Luketic's (2001) film *Legally Blonde* was an instant sensation when it was released in the summer of 2001. Produced for a modest 18 million dollars, the film earned an estimated 100 million dollars in domestic box office (Internet Movie Database [IMDb], 2001). The movie touted popular commercial product placements, boosted star Reese Witherspoon to the A-list, and produced a modestly successful 2003 sequel. Many attribute the film's success to its protagonist Elle Woods. Yet Elle's over the top representation of femininity and her stylish approach to educational success distracts viewers from the film's problematic politics.

This film captures audiences' imagination through Elle, a character who injects personality, style, and humor into an austere Ivy League setting. She does this while teaching lessons about the value of female intuition, sisterhood, and beauty. Yet by focusing on the character of Elle Woods and her success story, viewers fail to

critically examine the role that power and privilege have to play in the construction of the seemingly enlightened messages at the core of this film. The character of Elle Woods and her lifestyle of glib, sexy success has been vigorously marketed. Lucrative product placements appear throughout the film and figure prominently in the ultimate success of Elle Woods, both as a character in the film and as a commercially marketed lifestyle (Finnegan, 2001). The mass appeal of *Legally Blonde* (Luketic, 2001) justifies exploring the film as a popular cultural representation of diversity, education, and success. Before critically examining the film and its heroine it is important to understand how women have been popularly represented within educational contexts.

Hinton (1994) argues that Hollywood's romance with academe emphasizes the challenges of turbulent eras in education. Producers of films set in education, (popular education films) have similarly tackled turbulent issues of cultural difference in education causing critics to cite problematic representations of race, class, and difference.

Critics have especially argued that representations of racial difference in films set in educational settings are uneven (Ayers 1994; Dalton, 1999; Farhi, 1999; Giroux, 1997; Grant, 2002). Less has been written on women in popular education films.

Farhi (1999) argues that film promotes the myth of the lone male superteacher. Women appear as superteachers in films like *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Neame, 1969) and *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer & Smith, 1995) but they are more frequently depicted in ways that detract from their authority. Dalton (1999) argues that female teachers in film, unlike male teachers, must publicly mother young students while privately suffering from unhappy, empty, or failed personal lives. Kantor (1994) theorizes that a public-private split exists in the 1950's television and radio sitcom *Our Miss Brooks* (as cited in Kantor, 1994) as the title character spends more time unsuccessfully courting the biology teacher than actually teaching. Miss Brooks reflects the stereotype that school is a diversion for women who are really searching for a husband. Characters in the film *Mona Lisa Smile* (Newell, 2003) set at Wellesley in the 1950's, joke about this stereotypical woman who only attends college to earn her "Mrs. degree."

Female students in film face a similar public/private split and often appear as one dimensional characters. In films like *Dead Poets Society* (Wier, 1989) and *The Emperors' Club* (Abraham & Hoffman, 2002) female students are mere plot devices through which male students can express their heterosexuality. In films like *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955) and *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer & Smith, 1995) female students face sexual harassment (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). The archetype of the sexualized schoolgirl is exemplified by Brittany Spears' performance as a private schoolgirl/siren in the video, *Hit Me Baby One More Time*. It is ironic that images of women in education are so limited because research finds that the school experience is more marketable to

females than to males (Weber & Mitchell, 1995).

There have been attempts to move women to the head of the class with varying degrees of commercial success. Bruckheimer and Smith's (1995) film *Dangerous Minds* profiles real life teacher LouAnne Johnson. Dalton (1999) argues that this film's protagonist struggles to balance public and private life. Additionally the film has been criticized for its disregard for race and class issues (Giroux, 1997). The film *Mona Lisa Smile* (Newell, 2003), has been both praised for bringing feminist issues in education to greater awareness and criticized for providing a singular view of feminism and few solutions for women's educational oppression (Hamdam, 2005). Specifically to the focus of this study, some argue that the *Legally Blonde* franchise (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2003; Luketic, 2001) while sometimes over the top, presents a positive image of women in education. Banks (2001) argues that Herman-Wurmfeld's (2003) *Legally Blonde 2* encourages a broad camaraderie among women that crosses class lines. Relevant to the preceding mention of public and private lives, Lasher (2002) argues that Elle Woods is a "female protagonist who is able to overcome her personal life and succeed professionally." Feminist critic O'Leary (2003) argues that Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde 2* (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2003) is pro-feminist for not using her sexuality for gain and instead using her sisterhood network of women to do grassroots political organizing against the practice of animal testing. The first *Legally Blonde* film (Luketic, 2001) is more relevant to this study because it depicts Elle's education at Harvard Law School while the second film takes place after graduation.

This study focuses on the first film for its relevance to issues of socio-cultural difference, critical politics, and education. The aim of this study is not to reject the feminist and pro-women messages that critics and viewers have derived from this film. Instead the aim is to ask what is

missing from this representation or more specifically what, from a critical perspective, has been sacrificed in the presentation of this seemingly positive image of a woman in education. To do this requires analyzing what the film teaches about learning, socio-cultural diversity, and the marketing of educational images of women. Analysis requires critically examining the film, film publicity and criticism, and viewers' reactions. To discuss this film requires elaborating on Fiske's (1987) tri-level method which will be used to study this film.

Method

This study uses Fiske's (1987) tri-level method for studying popular cultural texts. At the primary level the film text is analyzed for content that is relevant to a critical understanding of gender, race, class, and sexuality issues in education. The secondary level examines criticism and publicity texts that focus on the primary film text. Criticism was found in popular and theoretical writings; and reviews and publicity included theatre posters and promotional material. Fiske (1987) notes how criticism and publicity texts show film producers and critics vying for control over the meaning of the primary text. The third/tertiary level explores viewer responses or texts created in response to the primary film as found on message boards and film fan websites (Ho, 2001). Tertiary texts may report a viewer's feelings and thoughts on the primary film text and/or they may also report a viewer behavior such as adopting a film characters' dress, life philosophy, and/or possessions. Such viewer behaviors are especially relevant for understanding how viewers can endorse a film by participating in the commercial marketplace of products and ideas.

Fiske's (1987) tri-level method assumes that bringing together content from three levels of text will result in both similar and contradictory meanings, provide perspective, and allow dialogue.

Using Fiske's (1987) method requires examining a variety of data from various sources and that results in a better understanding of the strains of discourse that circulate around the film, its characters, and its issues. The researcher must then consider what is at stake for participants in the discourse, whether film producers, critics or viewers, in advancing particular meanings of a film. That said, the data that emerges from the Fiske's (1987) three levels can be viewed as attempts to shape discourse and influence how we represent and talk about issues that the film addresses (e.g., femininity, socio-cultural diversity, educational success).

Fiske's (1987) tri-level method allows that the meanings of popular cultural texts are not singularly fixed but multiple as the text is disseminated and consumed. As a widely distributed film, *Legally Blonde* (Luketic, 2001) is open to multiple meanings. This study offers a reading of the film from the standpoint of a critical perspective on diversity in education. In the following section Fiske's (1987) tri-level data is grouped and discussed according to three critical themes.

Results

This study is not exhaustive but is relevant to understanding how Luketic's (2001) film *Legally Blonde* participates in a discourse about difference. Content that was extracted from the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of text are used to guide and inform the following conversation about critical issues of representation and education. The results section focuses on three interrelated themes: (1) representing gender and learning, (2) marginalizing race, class, and sexuality, and (3) marketing Elle Woods. The discussion section at the end of this study considers the implications of the contradictory messages about diversity within the film.

Theme One: Representing Gender and Learning

This theme considers how the lead character of Elle Woods is constructed as both a woman and a student. Much of Elle's gender identity is constructed through juxtaposing her own unique performance of femininity with the male identified learning environment. For instance, in the first classroom scene Professor Stromwell teaches using the Socratic Method. Stromwell notices student Elle because she wears stereotypically feminine attire while taking notes on a pink heart shaped pad in contrast to her classmates who wear business attire and use laptops. Elle admits that she did not prepare for the class. Professor Stromwell asks Vivian, Elle's classmate, whether it is reasonable for her to ask Elle to leave the class. Professor Stromwell teaches using the Socratic Method which is concerned with what is reasonable and logical. Vivian agrees that it is reasonable and Elle leaves the classroom. Elle's stereotypically feminine appearance is used in this scene to set her apart from her staid and sober looking classmates. This device creates humor throughout the film and becomes Elle's claim to identity in film posters and publicity. Elle's loud pink clothing and accessories mark her as visually different to support how the film positions her as an unlikely outsider who forges her own path to learning.

Elle's academic icy exile strikes a chord with respondent Aura Berry who asks, "Was anybody else terrified of University after this?" This query prompts several replies. Many respondents validate Aura Berry's reaction to the film and/or reassure her that the reality of university is kinder than on film. Duchess of Death replies, "Trust me, you are not expected to read the first five chapters for the first class. Laptops, are also unnecessary." Juanmonge69 replies, "If you really want to be scared at law school see the best law school movie ever made [...] *The Paper Chase*" (Ho, 2001). This thread is significant because it shows viewers

attempting to understand, reframe, and prepare for academic reality by using film representations.

In this scene Professor Stromwell uses the Socratic Method to instill fear; however when used responsibly this method is not meant to be an inquisition but an invitation for students to participate (McKeachie, 1999; University of Chicago, 1998). The Socratic Method is negatively represented in education films like Bridges' (1973) film *The Paper Chase*. Both films use the method to suggest a classroom with a male orientation towards individualistic and competitive learning. Students vie with each other for the right answer and Professor Stromwell uses the method to bar Elle from the classroom. Elle's sorority background leads her to believe in a sisterhood of women so when Vivian rules against Elle she is shocked. Elle's belief in sisterhood allies her with a feminine style of education that emphasizes collaboration and support.

So while the film seems to validate sisterhood it makes this point by creating an unflattering picture of women in academia. Vivian is shown as opportunistic and vindictive in her desire to rid the class of Elle and Professor Stromwell seemingly singles Elle out of the class for her feminine appearance. In their exchange Vivian and Professor Stromwell speak only of reason and logic and ignore Elle's humanity as a student. Are viewers to take that these women have sacrificed their femininity, and thus sisterhood, to the old boy's club of Harvard Law? Ultimately the film champions Elle as a woman who refuses to sacrifice her femininity and her belief in sisterhood in order to succeed. The problem with championing Elle is that so much of her particular performance of femininity is limited to superficial aspects of female identity. Additionally problematic is how the filmmakers position Elle as an underdog by placing Elle in opposition to women who do not reflect Elle's own individual notion of femininity.

Elle's representation focuses on her preoccupation with fashion, beauty, and

fitness and how having such limited interests is the key to her success. In the final court scene of the film Elle uses the Socratic Method to cross-examine Chutney who is suspected of killing her father. Elle repeatedly questions Chutney's assertion that she was in the shower when Elle's client allegedly committed the murder. The female judge and prosecutor lose patience with Elle when she repeats her questions. Chutney claims to have had a perm the morning of the murder. Elle embarks on a series of simple questions starting with some general observations about a sorority sister's perm and inductively reasons her way to the conclusion that Chutney was not showering, as it would have damaged her perm, but was instead murdering her father. Elle's leaves the defendant no recourse but to admit to her guilt. Questioned by reporters after the trial Elle replies, "The rules of hair care are simple and finite. Any Cosmo girl would have known."

Elle's aesthetic highlights her as an underdog as spectators dismiss Elle as a dumb blonde because of her tight pink dress, pink rhinestone belt, and pink heels. Again Elle is positioned in opposition to the prosecutor and judge, who as professional women present a businesslike facade. While Elle pursues her seemingly redundant line of questioning about perms, she tries the patience of both women who, because they are not "Cosmo girl[s]," fail to see the significance. Elle wins the case but her victory is intended to be that much sweeter because she triumphs over the impatient prosecutor and judge who presume that Elle lacks intelligence. This scene and others create an opposition between Elle's image of femininity and those that differ from Elle.

Elle's success is depicted as coming from the fact that she does not allow what appears to be true, as she personally knows that appearances can be deceptive, dissuade her from what she intuitively as a woman knows to be true. In the first classroom scene Professor Stromwell emphasizes the quote, "Law is reason free from passion." Elle is shown operating counter to this quote

in the film because she is shown drawing upon her passion and personal experience to achieve the reason that law requires. The film presents Elle as being connected to her body, her emotions, and her intuition. The problems with this are that the knowledge that Elle embodies seems concerned only with appearances and that women around her do not have this connection because they have seemingly lost their femininity. The message embodied by Elle seems contradictory because on one hand her example urges young women to trust their instincts and not be afraid to strive for success as a woman. The film's treatment of other women (e.g., Professor Stromwell, Vivian, Enid, Chutney, the judge, and the prosecutor) seems to caution women against losing their femininity in both appearance and action. In this way the films appears to be asserting a pro and anti-woman message at the same time.

Many popular education films connect student-protagonists' success to their desire to overcome gender and/or racial barriers. It is theorized that embodying differences of race and gender can be a place of learning for students (Smith, 2002). Elle Woods, the protagonist of *Legally Blond*, is posited in this film as having a personal learning mission because she has faced barriers within academia. The literature attests that higher education poses barriers to women including, but not limited to, privileging male dominated environments and knowledge structures, devaluing women's ways of knowing, and offering fewer role models and support for women (Barata, Hunjan, & Leggatt, 2005; Coate, 1999; Miller & Kastberg, 1995). Elle does face the exclusion of her peers and sexual harassment from her professor but on the other hand the circumstances surrounding Elle's expedited access to the Harvard Law School makes light of affirmative action policies that are meant to help diverse individuals.

In one scene the admissions board meets to decide upon Elle's admission. In Elle's video application she prances around

her California estate in a bikini and the white, male board members decide to admit her for the sake of "diversity." It is meant to be funny because Elle is white, rich, beautiful, and thus not meant to be seen as diverse by audiences. She does not face the challenges that women in academe, especially working class and minority women, can face.

The film stresses how Elle's experiences as a woman who faces barriers because of her particular feminine identity actually facilitate her formal learning. Elle is not an embodied learner because she fails to fully consider how her experience of difference positions her in relation to others. Such a learner would not confuse significant experiences of difference with stylistic differences of the body. These significant lived experiences of racism and discrimination within education would ideally compel them forward to greater educational goals. For instance, some critical voices in academia have attempted to write raced, classed, and gendered bodies into a white curriculum. Elle is reflective of her body but only in a superficial way because her knowledge seems to be primarily about cosmetics and accoutrements. As a character, Elle is unreflective about her own whiteness and her class privilege. The film as a whole overlooks and/or ignores issues of race, class, and sexuality as is explored in the next theme.

Theme Two: Marginalizing Race, Class, and Sexuality

This theme considers the lack of representation of race, class, and sexuality. The film fails to recognize diverse individuals as characters, minimizes their differences, and/or makes them an object of humor. How these differences are represented is relevant as one of the central messages of the film is to celebrate individual difference summed up by one of the film's publicity taglines, "Don't judge a book by its hair color!" In the earlier

described first classroom scene, Professor Stromwell asks students the origins of the quote, "Law is reason without passion." Rodney replies, "Aristotle?" Professor Stromwell asks whether Rodney would risk his life on this answer and he says that he would. Professor Stromwell then taps the head of the one Black student in her law class with a pointer and asks, "Would you bet his life on it?" Rodney backs down before Professor Stromwell grants that Rodney's answer was correct.

Viewers only see the back of this Black student's head, he is unnamed, and he does not respond when the professor taps him. This nameless Black student is an object/prop versus a subject with an identity. That the professor chooses a lone Black student seems like a token move by the filmmakers to include a visible minority in the film and to point out his presence in case viewers should overlook him. In addition to being reduced to an object, the professor's question to Rodney places this Black student in a powerless position. When Professor Stromwell asks Rodney if he would risk the student's life, she is asking Rodney to imagine himself as a defense attorney to this Black student in the role of defendant. Casting the Black student as the defendant draws on media stereotypes that depict Blacks as criminals. Professor Stromwell teaches explicitly about the nature of certainty while also imparting an implicit lesson on race.

The film itself is set on the affluent Harvard Law School campus and in the surrounding community. The latter is where Elle meets manicurist and friend Paulette Bonafonté. During the course of their friendship Paulette becomes homeless after being dumped by her ex-boyfriend who kicks her out of the couple's shared trailer home. Elle then helps Paulette reclaim her beloved dog by returning to the trailer and threatening Paulette's ex with legal action. Beyond her lack of a partner Paulette seems economically unfazed by her unexpected upheaval. At the end of the film Paulette has

married a UPS deliveryman and is pregnant with their first child.

Paulette's trailer park home and manicurist job represent a working class status. Paulette faces no adversity as a result of being homeless and that hardly seems plausible for a working class person. The film further positions socio-economic class as irrelevant within the friendship between Paulette and the affluent Elle. Through their shared connection to beauty culture the two are presumed to transcend class. hooks (2000) argues that a similar assumption is made by companies that use diverse models in their advertising. She notes how these diverse images create a false sense of multiculturalism by implying that there are no differences when diverse individuals are depicted as sharing the same commercial products. In other words because Elle and Paulette both share a love of blondness, manicures, and the color pink it is easy to lose sight of the fact that they come from two different economic realities. Similarly the film's producers encourage viewers to connect with Elle by purchasing the products associated with the character. This reality that the two women are different becomes clear at the end of the film. Elle is the convocation speaker and a postscript tells us that she has a prestigious offer of employment after graduation while Paulette is now married to the UPS man and pregnant. Family and children are depicted as success for working class Paulette versus Elle's guarantee of upward mobility as a Harvard Law graduate and member of the upper class whether she practices law or not.

The film overlooks race and class just as it fails to deal with issues of sexuality. When Elle meets her classmates, one of them named Enid, notes her affiliation with lesbian and feminist causes. Later at a party Enid explains to classmate Warner how she petitioned the school to change the male identified word "semester" to the woman identified "ovumester." Elle enters the party dressed as a playboy bunny because of a joke played at her expense. Before Elle leaves the party she has a tense exchange

with Enid. Elle asks what she did to deserve Enid's scorn and Enid replies that girls like Elle would call her a "dyke." Elle asserts that she would never do this and then leaves the party.

Enid, like other women in the film, is portrayed in opposition to Elle because of Elle's femininity. The categories of feminist and lesbian are joined, in stereotypical fashion in the character of Enid who holds a Ph.D. in women's studies. As a feminist lesbian Enid's concern with word choices is intended to be a source of amusement. Communication scholars uphold that language shapes one's reality yet the point of Enid's comments are likely not meant to reinforce this point but to make women's activism seem nit-picky and anti-male.

In the exchange between Enid and Elle there is the kernel of a significant conversation. Enid expresses resentment at how attractive, heterosexual women like Elle can marginalize lesbians while Elle counters that she does not do this. The conversation highlights how our sexuality and gender position and privilege us differently in society. The problem is that the conversation ends with Elle's rejecting of Enid's perception of her. At the end of the film viewers see Enid happily looking on as Elle delivers her graduation speech. The pair are now friends yet the film gives no explanation of how they have resolved their differences.

Theme Three: Marketing Elle Woods

This theme considers how the character of Elle Woods is marketed to young women as a lifestyle. As a character, Elle's representation is interconnected with commercial products used in creating a lifestyle of happy-go-lucky individuality. In tertiary level texts, viewers repeatedly report actively seeking out products used by Elle to seemingly bring themselves closer to and show support for Elle's persona. In discussing the pro-feminist message in Herman-Wurmfeld's (2003) film *Legally Blonde 2* O'Leary (2003, p. 56) argues

"[Elle] refuses to allow herself to become either commodified or fetishized in exchange for personal or professional advancement." Yet realistically Elle could live off of the residuals from the gratuitous product promotion in the first film. Ultimately, companies have profited from consumers' consumption of and identification with Elle Woods. Luketic's (2001) film *Legally Blonde* and its protagonist Elle Woods offer a philosophy of women's educational empowerment while targeting women as a market for consumer goods which some viewers perceive will help them to reach their goals. The accoutrements of stereotypical femininity factor significantly in the story of Elle Woods's success. The success of the film and its resonance with young women is partially due to the message that women can celebrate their sexual difference in academe that initially reads as empowering. How this message is executed opens the film to critique.

Elle's persona evokes images of traditional feminine stereotypes. In the opening credits Elle, actually a body double for actress Reese Witherspoon, is shown brushing her blond hair 100 times as per the conventional beauty wisdom. Elle's trademark is her favorite color pink, her predilection for stereotypically feminine outfits, and her Chihuahua whom she carries everywhere. When viewers first see Elle in class she assembles an Ivy League identity through fashion. Wearing black-framed glasses, an oversized argyle sweater coat, and loose necktie with teased hair and carrying a pink heart shaped pad, Elle creates her own version of intellectual chic. It is more important that Elle work to create this aesthetic than it is to prepare for her class.

Elle's performance of traditional femininity is not just dress but extends to the way that she carries herself. Everyday tasks are stylized, carried out in a distinctive performance. Another person might simply retrieve an object dropped on the floor, but Elle retrieves it with a flourish using a

method she trademarks as the "bend and snap." This is a lesson that Elle shares with the patrons of the beauty shop. Elle immerses herself in this culture and finds friendship with beautician Paulette Bonafonté. The filmmakers position this salon as being outside of the scope of the classroom as a welcoming place where women and gay men bond over beauty practices.

The film tries to disarm Elle's sexuality as a source of power by noting how her beauty practices are a turn off to many heterosexual men. In publicity, posters, and the film itself men are shown puzzling over and/or wincing at Elle's overdone aesthetic. Even Elle's partner Emmett is initially shown being amused rather than aroused by Elle's appearance upon their first meeting. The film markets beauty culture, at least Elle's version of beauty culture, as for women's enjoyment and not for men's benefit. It goes without saying that beauty culture can be problematic from a critical perspective because it promotes adherence to unrealistic beauty standards. However, in this film the beauty shop is shown as a place of affiliation, community, and support for Elle and her beautician-friend Paulette.

It is possible to venture a pro-feminist reading of some aspects of beauty culture where women can engage in support and care for women's physical and emotional self. Cahill (2003) argues that beauty culture can further feminist goals when women engage in reciprocally caring for each other's physical emotional selves. Yet while the beauty industry is promoted in this film it can be exclusionary for women who cannot or do not want to fit the rigid aesthetic of often white beauty standards that the beauty industry promotes. There is a class critique that looms behind this seemingly positive depiction. Female respondents embracing of the message of reclaiming beauty from the male gaze and looking to buy into this message, literally, have fueled the products of several cultural industries. The span of commercial product tie-ins and placements in the movie is

staggering. In the opening credits alone are endorsements for Clinique's Happy cologne, Clairol hair color, and Red Bull energy drinks (Finnegan, 2001, May 2). The products are positioned as necessary within Elle's daily regimens and viewers eager to uphold the image of Elle Woods report actively owning and consuming these products.

Many viewers seek out Elle's distinctive orange Apple notebook computer in bulletin board postings. Apple notebook computers are a product placement and also used to insinuate that Elle is a culturally different learner. Elle's distinctive tangerine Apple notebook visually distinguishes her in a sea of black and gray laptops. Elle's appearance separates her from her peers and now her computer continues this theme. Distinguishing Elle by her unique look resembles Apple's attempts to visually and ideologically distinguish its computers from other PC's. This culminated in a \$100 million dollar campaign with the slogan "Think Different" featuring icons like Muhammed Ali, Pablo Picasso, and Rosa Parks who are lauded for having the courage to think differently even when others thought they were crazy (Johnson, 1997). "Think Different" is an extension of the company's legendary "1984" campaign that positioned the company's then McIntosh computer as a revolution in a world of nondescript PC clones. Garfield (2001, p. 45) argues that the cumulative message of such commercials is, "To own an Apple is to be brave, iconoclastic, and defiant in a community of like minded individualists." Most would not associate such revolutionary individuals and ideas with a character such as Elle. However having Elle use this product when no one else does affiliates her as someone who thinks differently. Are viewers meant to read Elle as role model for young women in education?

Viewers want to acquire the Apple notebook because it sets Elle apart from the crowd. Several bulletin board threads ask how users can acquire the exact model of notebook that Elle uses in the movie (Ho,

2001). The exact model of notebook is no longer in production so board users offer information about model number, color, size, and memory and suggest places where one might find one (e.g., on Amazon.com or e-Bay). That this question prompted a discussion leads *hellothereclaire* to ask, "Why is everyone like freaking out over this question?" Other bulletin board users ignore her question and continue the discussion in its original direction.

Other bulletin board threads deal primarily with sharing information on how to acquire other products that were depicted as integral to helping Elle achieve her educational goals with distinctive style (e.g., her brand of cologne, hair color shade, shoes, bags, and princess telephone) (Ho, 2001). Respondent *i_luv_mick_he_is_hot* makes the urgent request, "I am obsessed with the phone [...] it was like all pink and fluffy [...] please help" and she is aided in her search by other board participants. Market research shows that the commercial element of Elle's identity appeals to young female consumers 13-34 who are the target audience of both the film and its related products (Finnegan, 2001). Fans' endorsement of the products associated with the film suggests a desire to engage with the film, its protagonist, and/or its message in everyday life.

A discussion of hair color leads bulletin board users to share experiences of exclusion like Elle's. *Angel_cake24* shares, "I am a blonde who went brunette because of things like this. I am an honor roll student who got laughed at [...] I went into it hoping it would help people see blondes in a better light and it did." *Eejij1225* notes how the film helped her sister overcome educational hurdles noting, "My sister is a successful lawyer because of this movie," and similarly *Crewgrrl20* notes, "That is sort of like my life, although I went to Georgetown and not Harvard." These and other comments show viewers identifying with Elle's struggle against stereotypes which is clearly a central message of the film. In contrast critical respondent *Ho* (2001) seizes on the

filmmaker's attempts to reclaim blondness and sardonically argues, "That was the point of this film. Celebrate diversity, even if that includes the hopelessly superficial."

It is problematic that Elle's success is affiliated with lifestyle and consumerism. hooks (2000) critiques the film *Clueless* (Heckerling, 1995), a precursor to the *Legally Blonde* films (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2003; Luketic, 2001), for its celebration of ridiculous values of the "wealthy world even as they glamorize possessions" (p. 83). hooks (2000) argues that youth, by focusing on material culture, are distracted from more significant markers of social difference. As discussed in the second theme, class, race, and sexuality are virtually excerpted out of representations of cultural difference in Luketic's (2001) film *Legally Blonde*. hooks (2000) argues, "Such thinking produces a symbolically 'classless' society in that these values are shared by youth culture irrespective of race, gender, or class positionality" (p. 81). Equality through product consumption hides the fact that there are people who cannot afford to consume and thus are exempted from this mass produced vision of success through consumption.

Young women who feel different within academia revel in the film by seeking Elle's lifestyle products as a common point of cultural reference. This impulse to relate to Elle facilitates their mass consumption of commercial products that actually subverts the message that the user of these products is unique. This data suggests that Elle's representation of one woman's success has compelled some young women to think and perform their identities differently or at least to reclaim elements of femininity and beauty that are celebrated by Elle. This allows the consumer to buy into that performance by purchasing consumer goods. At what cost does this consumer activity occur? Characters like Elle Woods are more successful and profitable as commercial spokespeople than as images of female empowerment because Elle is essentially

born of an ideology that constructs an image through commercial and aesthetic means.

Discussion

As always, there are gaps in any genre of representations. hooks' (1994) argues that education must bridge the mind-body gap meaning that students must embody learning and also think through the body. Media representations of women as learners can widen this gap or overcome it to depict the woman as a whole learner who is reflective of how she is socially positioned. As a character, Elle Woods does start to consider the barriers faced by women in academia but she is particularly unreflective about her own social privileges. The depiction of a woman as a student should not mean that viewers ignore other markers of social difference.

Luketic's (2001) film *Legally Blonde* seems to yield contradictory meanings. The film offers a *vive la différence* message yet this message is executed by celebrating only the differences that are applicable to Elle Woods. So while the film advances an acceptance of difference is this message undercut by focusing on the hopelessly superficial? There are chances in this film for significant considerations of race, class, sexuality, and gender but they are overlooked for the sake of developing a single character that drives the plot. So while Elle succeeds in overcoming the barriers posed to her it seems that her empowerment comes at the expense of others' marginalization which is hardly empowering.

The fact that a student-protagonist like Elle Woods is so well received is hardly a coincidence. Elle is white, attractive, and affluent and these characteristics allow filmmakers to target a demographic for the purpose of marketing commercial products. Elle is an appealing educational role model in the eyes of mainstream film audiences because she achieves her goals, arguably, through hard work, perseverance, and with a characteristic style. Yet by vigorously

marketing the Elle aesthetic the film creates the illusion that individuals, regardless of their circumstances, can share in this image of educational success when such is not the case.

This study examined several sites of cultural meaning in one popular education film that engages issues of identity, diversity, and educational success. While Luketic's (2001) film *Legally Blonde* may pose challenges from a critical perspective there is hope for representations of women in education in independent education films like *Real Women Have Curves* (Cardoso and La Voo, 2002) that forgo large commercial profits for the sake of privileging more realistic stories of women's educational adversity and success. Working with Internet communities of film fans suggests that there is a viable audience for popular education films that offer women increased presence roles of greater substance. It is perhaps this audience that would value the exploration of critically minded female characters and learning processes. So when Elle and characters like her seem to have it all, one must ask, at whose expense does it all come?

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